

August 20 Lesson: Judgment in the Kingdom

Summer Quarter 2023: The Righteous Reign of God Unit 3: God's Eternal Reign

Sunday School Lesson for the week of August 20, 2023 By Jay Harris

Lesson Scripture: 1 Corinthians 4:1-6, 17-21

Key Verse: “Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God.” (1 Corinthians 4:5)

Lesson Aims

- To tie today's theme, “Judgment in the Kingdom,” together with our emphasis on God's reign
- To give some quick background on the congregation in Corinth and Paul's ministry there
- To shed light on the divisions in the church in Corinth
- To show how Paul was lifting up himself and Apollos as examples to follow toward unity
- To learn what it means for God alone to be our judge and consciously live under God's authority
- To examine how certain Corinthians were acting out arrogantly in Paul's absence
- To explain how this talk amounted to a power play that was antithetical to the kingdom of God
- To explore the right ways to involve our brothers and sisters to help hold us accountable to God

Judgment in the Kingdom

The theme of this lesson is “Judgment in the Kingdom.” All summer long, we have been studying scripture passages that help us explore the theme of God's righteous reign. Whenever we speak of the reign of God, we also speak of living under the righteous rule of God or “will of God.” Whenever we pray the Lord's Prayer, we pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” God rules over the universe. God's rule holds everything together, whether we are speaking of the physical universe, human lives, or human societies.

As ruler of all, God is also Judge. To people of faith, who ponder this long enough, the news that God is Judge is good news. This means that God is upholding the universe and its processes in countless ways at all times. It also means that when things are not right, God, at times, sets them right. This also is good news. It also means that one day in the future, God will set all things right for eternity.

For instance, oppression will cease. This is why many of the prophets devoted a part of the message to God's judgment of the nations. The judgment of the nations was good news to those

being oppressed, and it was meant to put the oppressor on notice. Jesus also spoke of judgment in his parables, as we have studied in this series. The judgment at the end of time will be when God and his angels sort out the good and the evil and vanquish evil.

Our key verse says, *“Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God.”* (1 Corinthians 4:5) We will examine the tendency to pronounce judgment before the time. We will also explore the conditions that cause us to get out of our lane, and get in God’s lane as Judge.

We will also examine what it means when the scripture talks about the coming of the Lord, and how the Lord will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and disclose the purposes of the heart. Finally, we will examine how to seek God’s commendation and stop living with an unhealthy dependence on other people for their commendation.

Paul’s Letter to the Church in Corinth

We are indebted to Paul for giving us an inside view of a New Testament congregation in its early stages of development. His first letter to the church in Corinth is among the earliest New Testament writings. We are able to gain insight into this church with its potential and also its problems. The congregation is filled with new Christians who need to be taught much.

Most of the members of this congregation were gentiles who had once felt very much at home in the Graeco-Roman culture for which Corinth was known. As gentile Christians, they had not grown up being formed by the story of God’s people, but they were nevertheless being grafted into the story of Jesus the Messiah. Although the majority of the members were gentile Christians, there were a handful of influential Jewish Christian leaders who helped provide the foundation upon which they were being formed as a church.

Paul was one of these leaders who felt a special calling to share the gospel among the gentiles and form them into the church. Paul became the founding pastor of the congregation in Corinth on one of his missionary journeys, most likely around 50 A.D. In this letter, he refers to a previous letter he sent and one that was sent to him with a list of issues for him to address. He probably wrote the letter that we call First Corinthians a few years after he helped birth the church. He also anticipated returning to the church in person some day in the future to strengthen them as a congregation.

Divisions in the Corinthian Church

Let’s begin examining the culture of the church that was causing an epidemic of people pronouncing judgment on one another before the time when the Lord is supposed to come and rightly bring the truth to light. Early in the letter, Paul wrote, *“Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be knit together in the same mind and the same purpose.”*

For it has been made clear to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters." (1 Corinthians 1:10-11)

What holds the church together for Paul is how people are living under the common confession that "Jesus Christ is Lord." An important sign for Paul is the unity of the church and their ability to come together over differences. He had been getting news from reliable sources that there had been serious quarrels going on in the church. A spirit of partisanship was taking over the congregation. Partisan camps had formed in the church that attached themselves to various leaders with whom they had a connection. One group said, "*I belong to Paul.*" Another group said, "*I belong to Apollos.*" Still another group said, "*I belong to Cephas*" (Cephas is another name for Peter.)

It was not that Paul was jealous of Apollos or Peter. Paul asked them, "*Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?*" (1 Corinthians 1:12-13) Paul would have the congregation be united in Christ, not himself, or any other Christian leader. It seems that even in the New Testament era of the Church, there was a tendency for congregations to place too much emphasis on the personality of their leaders, whether it be a current leader or past leaders.

Ironically, the leaders themselves could have been oblivious to the fact that different camps had formed around them within the congregation. The leaders were bystanders in relation to the obsessive preoccupations of the factions. Paul's letter will raise up many issues over which the congregation is divided. The situation is not just about each group's allegiance to different leaders.

The more Paul gets into the letter, the more it seems that the congregation is mostly divided into a "Paul camp" and an "Apollos camp." Shortly after naming the factions in Corinth, Paul goes into a discussion about knowledge and wisdom, and how some individuals wanted to boast about their knowledge and wisdom over that of other individuals in the church. They were quite possibly the Apollos camp, because Apollos, the Alexandrian, was known for his eloquence.

Paul, on the other hand, admits that when he came to them, he did not come proclaiming the gospel in "superior speech and wisdom." He said, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." Paul says that he came to them "in weakness and in fear and in much trembling." His speech and proclamation were made "not with persuasive words of wisdom but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power." In other words, he did not try to win them over with his eloquence, but tried to present the message of the crucified Christ in its most simple and raw form, so that their faith would "rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God." (1 Corinthians 2:1-5)

It should be quickly noted that Paul did not have a problem with Apollos. The problem that Paul had was with a group in the church that claimed to have superior knowledge and wisdom over their brothers and sisters, who identified themselves as the Apollos camp. Paul was trying to put a stop to their boasting about themselves and their judging of others.

He said that God has not chosen that superior wisdom and knowledge should be what saves us. According to Paul, "God chose what is low and despised in the world" to be the basis of our

salvation. The basis of our salvation is Jesus Christ and him crucified. Paul said that God chose this “so that no one might boast in the presence of God.” Paul said “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 1:27-31)

It was the boasting that was the problem for Paul, not Apollos. The Apollos camp was probably not the only group boasting. There were at least two main groups that were divided against each other. One was claiming Apollos as their patron saint or mascot, and the other group was claiming Paul. So, Paul did a very wise thing. He started talking about the complementary nature of his own ministry and the ministry of his friend and colleague, Apollos. His intention was to lift up himself and Apollos as examples of cooperation for the congregation to follow.

Have you ever noticed a tendency of some Christians to “worship” the pastor? Have you ever noticed when one’s allegiance to a former pastor kept them from connecting to the newly appointed pastor? What consequences do you see in this? If the main problem was boasting, over what do Christians tend to boast in your experience?

Paul and Apollos as Examples to Imitate

This is how Paul described the complementary nature of Paul’s ministry and the ministry of Apollos. Paul wrote:

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and each will receive wages according to their own labor. For we are God’s coworkers, working together; you are God’s field, God’s building. (1 Corinthians 3:5-9)

Paul saw that his ministry and the ministry of Apollos each had a place in the work of God. Paul planted the church in Corinth, and Apollos came along afterward to water what Paul planted. Paul’s message of the cross was just the message the congregation needed at its planting. The ministry of Apollos was just what the congregation needed in the watering phase.

The most important thing for Paul however is that God is the one who gave the growth. Compared to the divine work of God, the servants carrying out that work are insignificant. Paul and Apollos should not be compared to one another. Nor should they be pitted against one another by members of the congregation because the ministries of Paul and Apollos are knit together into a single purpose. Paul and Apollos were coworkers, and Paul told the congregation, “You are God’s field, God’s building.”

Paul wanted the congregation to observe Paul and Apollos and follow their example. They should work together in the same way that Paul and Apollos were working together. They should see themselves on the same level with each other as Paul saw himself on the same level as Apollos, especially when compared to God whose work is so much above them.

What do you think of the analogy Paul used? How was Paul a planter? How did Apollos water the congregation? What was God doing? How did the ministries of Paul, Apollos, and God complement one another? What is the most healthy way for a congregation to respond to the ministries of various people with various giftings?

Whose Judgment Really Counts?

The background we have been exploring has been important for us to grasp. Now that we have explored the culture of the Corinthian church, and the message that Paul had begun to give them, we are ready to get into the scripture passage we are studying.

¹Think of us in this way: as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. ²Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.

Paul wanted the members of the church to think of Paul and Apollos as no more and no less than servants of Christ. The congregation should not put either Paul or Apollos on a pedestal. They were both humble stewards of God's mysteries, which is no small thing. But it is clearly the divine mysteries themselves, contained in and around the gospel of our salvation, that should be lifted up on a pedestal, not the stewards who, by the grace of God, have been given the privilege of sharing those mysteries.

Paul also understood that both he and Apollos must be deemed trustworthy in order to be duly recognized as God's stewards. They were leaders who were required to live and serve under authority. The question is, *under whose authority?*

³But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. ⁴I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.

Paul believed that he was solely under the Lord's authority in the living of his life and ministry. He gave little to no place for the members of the church or any human court to judge him. It was a presumptuous thing for the members of the church to sit in judgment over him. Paul had gotten to the point where he no longer allowed judgmental people to have an outsized influence over him. Paul put them on notice that he considered it to be a very small thing that he should be judged by them or by any human court. God was the only Judge who mattered.

He did not even consider himself to be his own judge. He could say on the one hand that he was not aware of anything at that moment that would be a mark against him, but he said it did not matter what he thought. He was not acquitted or declared innocent on the basis of what he thought about himself. God was the only judge who counted.

Worrying about what others think of you, or how they are judging you, can be paralyzing. This does not mean that we are not under authority. We are under God's authority. We are accountable to God. A part of living under the reign of God is living a life of accountability to

God. Anyone who would presume to be our judge is not qualified to be our judge, nor should such a one be able to speak judgment into our lives.

Paul wanted to free the Corinthians from the business of pronouncing petty judgments against one another and their leaders, because such behavior is a form of rebellion against God. They are claiming a privilege and responsibility that God alone possesses. Paul was trying to hold up the complementary nature of the ministries of Paul and Apollos as an example when two people let go of competition against one another and instead choose cooperation because they trust one another.

Churches will succeed to the degree that members trust one another and their leaders. The reason many churches cannot move forward with God is because there is a lack of trust.

Why do you think people may be quick to judge one another in the church? What keeps people, including yourself, from recognizing that they are judging? How would a lack of trust keep the church from moving forward?

Anticipating the Future Judgment

We are about to examine our key verse. It anticipates the time when the Lord will come again at the end of time in preparation for eternity. Whenever we talk about the Lord's future return, we are not to act as if it has nothing to do with us now. We are to anticipate this future reality in our present life. We are to live as if the Lord could come tomorrow. We are to live now in preparation for what is coming.

⁵ Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God.

When Paul tells them not to pronounce judgment before the time, he means that they are to suspend judgment until the time when the Lord will be the one to judge when the Lord returns, and not before that time. It is then that the Lord will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness. God will disclose the purposes of the heart. Every heart will be laid bare before God.

Then each one will receive commendation from God. Just as we should not let others speak judgment into our lives, we should also be cautious of receiving praise from others.

⁶ I have applied all this to Apollos and myself for your benefit, brothers and sisters, so that you may learn through us the meaning of the saying, "Nothing beyond what is written," so that none of you will be puffed up in favor of one against another.

"Nothing beyond what is written" was Paul's way of saying that he and Apollos were sticking to the basics, and they should also get back to basics. Paul and Apollos were seeking to stay "on mission" and the members of the Corinthian church should get back on mission. They should

cease this business of pitting Paul and Apollos against one another and using this kind of partisanship to be puffed up among themselves.

How are you looking forward to the return of Christ? What is your level of anticipation? What is your level of preparation? How should we prepare? What should we stop doing, and what should we start doing?

The Congregation Reveals Itself in Paul's Absence

Our scripture passage skips over to verse 17 to help us continue the theme we have been exploring. Remember that Paul was writing this letter because he was currently in ministry to the church in Ephesus. He had planned a visit to Corinth to strengthen the church, but it was not time yet.

It seems that the church was revealing itself to Paul in his absence. We all know of the tendency to present ourselves one way to a person when we are face-to-face with them and another way when they are absent. They were clearly showing Paul that they needed a representative of Paul to be with them.

¹⁷ For this reason I sent you Timothy, who is my beloved and trustworthy child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ Jesus, as I teach them everywhere in every church.

Paul sent Timothy, his child in the faith, and reminded them that Timothy was trustworthy in the same way that Paul was trustworthy. They could therefore trust Timothy to remind them of Paul's understandings of Christ's ways. These were the same teachings that Paul shared with every church. This was a way of caring for the congregation in his absence.

¹⁸ But some of you, thinking that I am not coming to you, have become arrogant. ¹⁹ But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power.

So, another point of contention with the Corinthian congregation was the criticism of one group against Paul that he was not being truthful when Paul said he was coming to them. This group had become very arrogant about the whole thing. They were setting themselves up as judges over Paul once again. No wonder that Paul was exasperated with them. When will the judging end? Can't they see the inappropriateness of this behavior?

Paul told them that he did intend to come to them if the Lord wills. When he was finally able to be present with them, he would be able to observe them with his own eyes. Would this group still be talking? Were they "all talk" and no action? Or was their "talk" indeed an "action" that was hurting the church? Did their words against Paul amount to a power play? When Paul visited the congregation in the future, he would find out the destructive power and influence this arrogant group held over the congregation.

They should not be afraid of Paul though. It is God to whom they must be accountable.

20 For the kingdom of God depends not on talk but on power.

It is our actions that will come under judgment. One of the phrases Paul uses in other letters in relation to the kingdom has to do with those who, because of their actions, will not inherit the kingdom. Paul is saying that behind all their “talk” were actions that were harmful to the body of Christ. Their behavior was antithetical to the kingdom of God. Their actions were therefore “anti-kingdom” in terms of the power and influence that they were attempting to wield in the congregation.

21 What would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a stick or with love in a spirit of gentleness?

It was Paul’s preference that these members of the Corinthian church examine their actions and change their behavior before he comes. He would rather come to them in a spirit of gentleness. He would rather not come and be forced to chastise them with the truth of their anti-kingdom actions. It was up to them.

Paul was no doubt praying that they would come under conviction and repent. Whether or not they came under conviction would have to do with the awareness of their accountability before God. They could not focus on their own accountability before God while they were preoccupied with their rivalries and factions and judging.

What temptations present themselves in the life of the church to act in ways that are antithetical to the kingdom? How do we deal with these in ways that contribute to a solution instead of contributing to the problem?

How We Bring Accountability into Our Lives

Paul in his letter has gone to great pains to show how he and Apollos were required, as stewards of God’s mysteries, to demonstrate their trustworthiness. The members of the church should imitate them and also act and behave as those who are under divine authority.

Paul had endured enough of their arrogant and presumptuous attempts to appoint themselves as Paul judges, whether they judged Paul to be their hero or their hero’s rival. Their preoccupation with judging Paul and Apollos was taking them away from what they should be doing, which was learning for themselves how to live under God’s authority, God’s judgment, and God’s righteous reign.

Have you ever gotten tied up in knots trying to meet other’s expectations? Has this pattern ever resulted in the voice of God being lost amidst all the chatter?

There is a place for involving others in your endeavor to live a life of accountability before God. It is a wise and healthy practice to appoint people in our lives whom we trust to provide a source of accountability. A good practice is to belong to an accountability group.

This is a group that covenants to practice mutual accountability. This is usually a small group where each member agrees to be accountable to one another. They hold one another accountable to spiritual practices that bring them in tune with God and keep them in tune. They may choose to confess their shortcomings to one another, and be there to speak forgiveness into each other. Notice that the goal is not for them to become judges of one another, but to keep them in touch with the God who is their judge and their redeemer.

The goal is not fix each other or set each other straight, but to be a sounding board as each member grows in his or her own relationship with God. Notice how different this is from the backbiting that can occur in congregations. The difference is night and day.

Let's return to a portion of our key verse and use it to come to a vision moment. Imagine we are in the presence of God and inviting God "to bring to light the things now hidden in darkness." Imagine that you have learned how to do this in your moments where you have sought solitude and you have stilled all the competing voices that bombard you. Imagine God disclosing to you "the purposes of the heart"—your own heart.

Imagine receiving "commendation," but not from your peers. How many of you can hear ten people give you a word of commendation, but it's the uninvited, off-hand, word of criticism that torments your spirit? Imagine receiving "commendation from God." Sometimes this divine commendation shows you where you were close to God and in the center of God's will.

Sometimes this divine commendation may say, "There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:1) In other words, the commendation is that, although you messed up, you are in Christ, and you are therefore able to learn from your mistakes and start again in God's unconditional love and unmerited favor—as one who is *highly* favored! Imagine the joy and peace you will be experiencing.

Have you ever been a part of an accountability group? Have you ever experienced this kind of accountability even if it was not in a formal group? How did you welcome it? How would you want to replicate the experience?

Prayer

Gracious God and Father of our returning King, in anticipation of his glorious return, deliver us now from the evil of pronouncing judgment before the time, bring to light things now hidden in darkness, and disclose the purposes of our heart, that we may receive our commendation from You, through our Lord Jesus Christ, who reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.

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